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THE GARDEN CALENDAR

A radio talk by W. R. Beattie, horticulturist, Bureau of Plant Industry, delivered Tuesday, March 3, 1931, in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by WRC and 39 other associated stations, National Broadcasting Company.

"To plant or not to plant a home garden," is the question in the minds of thousands of heads of families this spring. The United States Department of Agriculture is receiving more than the usual number of letters asking for garden information, also many inquiries as to the possibilities of employing home gardens as a means of providing food for the families of the unemployed. Many of the writers of these letters commend the Department in the highest of terms for the stand it has taken in encouraging the planting of gardens by farmers and others who are in position to cultivate gardens in order to safeguard the family food supply. Occasionally, a writer in no uncertain terms, condemns our policy on the ground that it leads to the curtailment of the demand for vegetables grown by commercial growers.

It is our policy to encourage the majority of farmers to maintain good vegetable gardens, and to produce the greater part of the vegetables required to supply their own tables. We also believe that many families living in small towns and villages, who have plenty of land, and whose incomes are limited, are justified in growing at least a part of their supply of small fruits and vegetables. In many cases, retired farmers living in small towns, have excellent gardens with plenty of vegetables for their own use, and, often some to sell to the neighbors.

There are thousands of farms on which there are no vegetable gardens, milk cow or poultry. The absence of these factors in the food supply of the family may, in a comparatively few cases, be justified on the ground that it is more economical to purchase the supplies than to produce them, but this is the exception and not the rule. The Department does not favor the keeping of cows on city lots, nor the raising of poultry in city backyards, and only approves of the planting of gardens by city people where something is greatly needed to supplement the family income, and help pull through an emergency. A few years ago, it was reported that in the French quarter of New Orleans, a cow was found being kept in a third story room of one of the houses, and that in another case pigs were being raised in cellars in Hoboken. Thousands of small flocks of poultry are being kept in city backyards. In Los Angeles, for example, a great egg-production industry has grown up in city lots, especially in the outer parts of the city.

There is a well founded economic principle that you cannot start a new industry or modify an established production practice without influencing some other existing industry or practice. Years ago, the market gardeners and greenhouse growers of the Eastern States, enjoyed an excellent market for their early frame or hothouse-grown lettuce, then came the big development of head lettuce growing in the far west and practically ruined the market for the eastern lettuce. Stored carrots found ready sale on our large eastern markets until the big fresh carrot industry of California and the Gulf Coast region flooded the markets with nice, tender, bunched carrots

in midwinter, and, materially reduced the demand for storage carrots. The story is told of a certain storekeeper in a town in Massachusetts, who, last summer assumed that on account of the drought in certain parts of the country, the supply of canned goods would be very short. Accordingly, he secured a large supply of cans and encouraged everybody to can plenty of fruits and vegetables for home use. He sold all of his cans and they were filled, but, as a result, he has no market for canned goods this winter.

The enormous development of centralized vegetable production, and the transportation of the products long distances in good condition under improved refrigeration, has radically changed the economic aspects of the whole vegetable industry. The situation is still further, and, I trust temporarily aggravated, by the curtailed buying capacity of thousands of families. Under present conditions, the planting of gardens by unemployed people would not materially affect the market for vegetables, because they do not have the money with which to purchase. On the other hand, any vegetables that these people may grow in their little gardens, will mean more food for their families, and just one step in keeping them from becoming dependent upon charity. Many of these people are too proud to accept charity, but they will work until their hands are blistered, if given a chance to plant and cultivate a productive garden.

That the cultivation of farm gardens for the production of vegetables to be used on the farm is economically sound cannot be disputed. The planting of gardens by retired farmers, and persons living in small towns and villages, is a well established practice and will undoubtedly continue. Furthermore, the difficulty being experienced today by market gardeners, in marketing their products, does not result to any degree from the competition of home gardens, but from the enormous centralized production in various sections financed on the investment basis. We now consume more vegetables than formerly, but centralized, commercial production has far outstripped any increased demand.

The continuation of the centralized production of vegetables is not to be discouraged. The Department is also endeavoring to extend a helpful service to the market gardeners and truck farmers who are operating on an individual basis. Under certain conditions, however, it may be best for the head of a family -- temporarily at least -- to plant and tend a garden as a means of supplementing the family income, and providing the necessary food for his family. The objective is economically sound so far as the individual is concerned.

Production costs in vegetable growing are being lowered by the use of labor-saving machinery, and by increasing the yields per acre. This releases a certain percentage of cultivated acreage for pasture and reforestation, and, at the same time, cuts total production costs. The vegetables grown by the gardener, who is working on a city lot, will doubtless cost more -- the time element considered -- than the market price, but, if through lack of employment at his regular trade or profession, the gardener cannot purchase his supply, it is to his interest and advantage to cultivate a garden. As I have said repeatedly in these garden calendar talks, it is economically sound for practically every family living on farms to have a garden, a cow or two, a small flock of poultry, some hogs, and other things that contribute to a good living at home.